

## **Media interviews**

Interviews are what most stories are based on (alongside press releases). They give articles colour and life, and reflect the publication or broadcaster's desire to be 'unbiased' by reflecting a range of views. They can be done over the phone, via email and in person.

## **Preparing for media interviews**

### ***Common interview fears are:***

- Is the journalist going to stitch us up?
- Are they going to ask us any trick questions?
- What if I forget what we are going to say?
- What happens if we just say it and we get it completely wrong?

*Always remember - you are the experts.*

### ***Point to consider***

Is the interview a threat to expose weaknesses? Or can we turn it into an opportunity to display our strengths?

### ***Avoid, where possible:***

- Blaming other organisations/individuals
- Revealing confidential or personal details
- Appearing arrogant or dismissive of public concerns, or the concerns of those who happen to disagree with you
- Complacency

### ***Think about your aims***

- Decide on your aims in advance
- What is it you want to get across?
- Make sure of your facts

### ***Decide what you want to say***

- Keep it short
- Think of examples
- Think through and prepare your least liked questions
- Avoid jargon
- If using figures, take care not to overwhelm with too many, particularly on radio
- Enjoy it - interviews are an opportunity to share the positive work WDM is doing, or the work being done to solve a problem

### ***Find out what you need to know:***

Just as an important as the interview itself is the pre-interview chat with the journalist (print media), producer/researcher (broadcast). This is where the journalist and the interviewer establish a rapport. The reporter will outline some of the key areas that they want to go over in the interview. It's also an opportunity for you to establish the boundaries of the interview, and what you can and can't discuss.

### **Media interview requests**

Interviews are what most stories are based on (alongside press releases). They give articles colour and life, and reflect the publication or broadcaster's desire to be 'unbiased' by reflecting a range of views.

**Always ensure that your organisation or group is name checked, particularly in radio interviews.**

### **Snapshot**

#### ***News piece (print/online media)***

- Usually requested over the telephone at short notice. May also send questions for you to answer via email.
- Ask them for their three main questions. If they haven't got them ready, this means they are not clear on the story's angle. If you aren't comfortable, suggest that they either ring you back with some idea of the questions to be asked (as you'd like to be prepared) or recommend another contact.
- To give yourself time to prepare, say you are interested in an interview, but ask them to ring back in 15-30 minutes. Alternatively, take their number and ring them back in 15-30 minutes. Use the time to prepare a short list of the main points you'd like to give, known as talking points. Be concise, as a few sentences are often all a news reporter will be able to use in a quote.
- After the interview, ask them to read back the quotes they will use in the final piece. This is permissible as I have been asked by politicians to read notes taken by shorthand/speed writing over the phone.
- Find out who else they are interviewing for the piece as that may influence your decision to participate or not.
- Find out their final 'copy' deadline and when the piece will be published.
- Either ask them to send you a copy of the published article, or ask them for the publication date so you can follow up.

#### ***Feature article (print/online media)***

- Where possible, get them to come in and interview you face to face.
- As the interviews and lead in times are longer, find out if they need to take photographs, require any background information and/or other people to interview. That helps to ground the piece in your favour.

- Ask the journalist what their angle is and why they are writing the piece.
- What type of feature is it - project piece, Q&A interview, general feature, investigative feature, topical feature, news-led feature...?
- Get a sense of the feature's tone. Will it be serious, questioning or light-hearted? This will help you answer the questions confidently and appropriately.
- Ask to see or be read the sections where they refer to you in the finished article. It is very rare that you will be shown the whole article (hence the importance of cultivating relationships with journalists). But you can ask to see how they have quoted you and have used your information.

### **Radio/TV**

- What sort of programme is it?
- What type of image of your organisation/yourself are they trying to portray?
- Is it live or pre-recorded radio/TV interview?
- Will it be transmitted straight or cut?
- Is it for international, national, regional or local radio?
- What sort of station is it i.e. speech, music or news station?
- What are they after, a sound bite for the news bulletin? Are they hoping to generate an argument? Are you expected to take a stance or an opposing view or are they after a two-way, where the programme wants you to share information about an article or report that you've written?
- Will you have to go into the studio or conduct the interview over the phone?
- As radio cannot afford any dead air or extended 'pregnant pauses' they usually brief you fully in advance. That said; always check as the 'top news line' may suddenly change.
- Bring along some preparatory notes on one sheet of A4 or cards, which you can refer to during the interview. For example, your core messages and secondary reinforcement examples.
- Always have an example or useful statistic to hand.
- Be clear about their line of questioning in advance.
- Find out who else will be on the show.
- What type of show is it – talk/discussion show, current affairs, for and against format...?
- Speak in short sound bites. If you forget your train of thought, just start again as if nothing has happened. Always answer the question in a decisive manner, yes you agree or no you don't agree followed by why with an example. If nervous, start by repeating the beginning of the question back in your answer.

- Find out if there is a fee as they do have a budget and/or if they are going to send a car to pick you up and drop you off. Unless you ask, they don't always mention that fact. If they aren't sending a car, try and get your travel expenses reimbursed.
- Remember to breathe (not too loudly).

## **Answering questions – a few tips**

### ***Bridges and transitions (useful for both radio and TV)***

- Try to lead off the interview with your key message.
- If you're asked a question, answer it to the best of your ability and then transition to your key message.

### ***Transitions and bridges can include responses such as:***

- *Another thing people would be interested in knowing is...*
- *Building on that point...*
- *At the end of the day, what this is all about is...*
- *Now, having said that...*
- *It's also worth noting that...*
- *What's important to keep in mind here is...*
- *Looking at the bigger picture...*
- If you're asked a question you can't answer, explain why. For example, (I don't know, that's confidential, or 'that's a fair question but I'm not the best/most qualified to answer it. What I can say is...' or 'What WDM believes is even more relevant is..'. And then say 'What I can tell you is...' and make the transition to your key message.
- The reporter may wrap up the interview by asking if there's anything you want to add. That's your opportunity to drive home your key message one last time.

## ***Off the record - a brief guide***

The term 'off the record' is often mentioned but not really understood. This is seen as a term said to a journalist indicating that what follows shouldn't appear in the finished article. The question is, should it be used at all? Is there ever a time when it is permissible to utter these words?

**Below** is a brief guide to allow you to make an 'informed' opinion.

- If you can't say it on the record then don't say it at all. This is a common position, but there are exceptions.
- Always say 'off the record' before you start speaking and ensure that the journalist agrees that it is, truly, off the record. Often they switch off their tape recorders or stop taking notes. It is best to use it with

journalists you have cultivated positive relationships with, if really necessary.

- If you say off the record at the end of a conversation or half way through, this doesn't stop the journalist using that information as it is 'retrospective'. Also if it is deemed to be in the public interest, what came before your off the record declaration will be usable.
- Use sparingly with trusted media contacts for them to use as 'background' information and only in relation to a developing story. Again a judgement call.
- Be careful if you are doing a print interview near a camera or taping equipment for a radio broadcast. If they inadvertently capture any of your conversation, they are not covered by your 'off the record' agreement as different rules apply for broadcasting and you may be in a public place.
- The expression 'off the record' isn't legally binding but may be upheld in court if the information gives rise to obligations of confidentiality. In this situation you may be able to sue for 'breach of confidence'. But if there are moral and ethical considerations that are deemed to be in the public interest, then an editor can justify publication.

## **No comment – a snapshot**

Don't believe that you can prevent negative press by not speaking. The 'no-comment' statement, is always suspicious for any journalist, no matter how tolerant they are.

### **How to avoid 'no comment' situations**

- Try to make sure that the journalists don't find out something awkward about your organisation before you do. Effective crisis management can help to limit the damage caused to your organisation's reputation by bad headlines. Some bad news stories will crop up out of the blue but many can be anticipated and planned for. You should ensure that they alert you when bad news – such as a critical report on one of your campaigns or funding irregularities – is on the horizon. You don't want to hear it from a journalist first.
- If the journalist is supposed to cover a story that requires sensible data (statistics, financial reports and so on) make sure to deliver correct information.
- Always provide the name and contact details of your spokesperson in every news release. This person should know everything about the

topic covered in a news release and should also be able to make an on the spot decision.

- Build a strong media culture within your group and organisation, through media training, guidelines and protocol.
- Build up background briefings and key facts for big stories in advance (a bit like an executive summary).
- Issue the news in a planned and managed way, rather than just react make sure the appropriate spokespeople are available for interview and are fully briefed.